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Nabokov, Dostoevski, Proust: Despair

Abstract

Although Nabokov criticism has long identified *Despair* with Dostoevski, critics have for the most part addressed *Despair* in terms of how it either attacks or validates Dostoevski and thus have understood Nabokov to be speaking primarily about Dostoevski's achievement as a novelist. As I argue, *Despair* revises Dostoevski as a sly assertion of Nabokov's paradoxical aesthetic independence, and does so through the medium of Marcel Proust. It predicts the more obvious Proustian influence that critics have noticed in Nabokov's later works. In *Despair* Proust gives Nabokov the fundamental modernist narrative that makes an artist's coming to consciousness coincident with the narrative the reader reads. Nabokov borrows Proust's narrative pattern and lends it to Hermann to mishandle, but neither author of *Despair* keeps it as his own. *Despair* is a failed Proustian novel, one that Nabokov arranges so that the failure is not technically his. Paying ironic and even humble tribute to the author to whom he was closest, Nabokov imprisons Hermann and his Dostoevskian fantasies within his own aesthetic universe and thereby separates Hermann's derivative Dostoevskian one from Nabokov's peculiarly original novel. Although Nabokov implies Proust is his ideal artist, the truth is that Nabokov, as always, points to himself. After Hermann disappears from the novel, one world remains, named *Despair*, and it belongs to Vladimir Nabokov and, perhaps, the reader.

Keywords

Nabokov, Despair, Dostoevski, Marcel Proust, Russian Literature, independence, Proustian influence, modernist narrative, modernist, ironic, irony, paying tribute, Hermann, Dostoevskian fantasies, Vladimir Nabokov

Nabokov, Dostoevski, Proust: *Despair*

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Vladimir Nabokov's distaste for Fyodor Dostoevski was as pronounced as it was flamboyant. His lectures and interviews are studded with disparaging and often hilarious dismissals of a writer who for many represents the essence of Russian literature.¹ He could on the one hand dismiss Dostoevski as "not a great writer, but a rather mediocre one," and more ambiguously admit that "just as I have no ear for music, I have no ear for Dostoevski the prophet" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 98, 104).² Nabokov was apparently aware that he was perhaps unfair to the prior writer. Once, after noting that Dostoevski did not make his list of the greatest nineteenth-century Russian writers, Nabokov admitted that he could imagine Dostoevski standing at his door demanding to know why he had been graded so poorly (157). If so, perhaps Dostoevski would bring with him a copy of Nabokov's *Otchaianie* (1934), translated by Nabokov as *Despair* (1966), for that is the work in which Nabokov dramatizes his relationship to Dostoevski. Along with Nabokov's novel, Dostoevski could also cite plenty of other readers to support his view. Jean Paul Sartre, who revered Dostoevski, infuriated Nabokov when he dismissed *Despair* as imitation-Dostoevski (Field 167). He could call on critics such as Sergei Davydov and Julian Connolly who have argued that with *Despair* Nabokov consciously reworks Dostoevski in order to pay him tribute. Dostoevski might have to suppress the testimony of Andrew Field, though, who remarked that Dostoevski "ends as the second, unnoticed corpse of the novel" (167).

Although Nabokov criticism has long identified *Despair* with Dostoevski, critics have for the most part addressed *Despair* in terms of how it either attacks or validates Dostoevski and thus have understood Nabokov to be speaking primarily about Dostoevski's achievement as a novelist. One crucial exception is Alexander Dolinin, who argues that Nabokov's 1964 English version of *Despair* is actually much more concerned with Dostoevski than his 1932-33 Russian version. Dolinin suggests that "what aroused Nabokov's wrath in the 1930s evidently was not Dostoevski but a strong Dostoevskian strain in the contemporary Russian literature from Symbolists to the post-revolutionary modernists" (44).³ Dolinin's essay is a revelation for non-Russian readers and confirms, I think, that for younger and elder Nabokov alike, the influence of Dostoevski remains central. Dolinin's work makes clear how in *Despair* Nabokov revises Dostoevski as a sly assertion of his aesthetic independence. I would add, though, that along with confronting the Russian modernists that Dolinin examines, *Despair* also registers Nabokov's growing interest in Proust. Indeed, what critics of *Despair* have missed, as Nabokov meant them to, is that Proust provides the narrative medium through which Nabokov asserts his mastery of Dostoevski. As his career developed, Nabokov's debt to Proust became clearer and is quite prominent in works such as *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and especially *Speak, Memory*. In tracing the Nabokov-Proust connection, critics have rightly focused on these works. Harold Bloom, stopping just short of saying that Nabokov is a failed Proust, has suggested that for Nabokov, Proust is the one writer whom he could neither avoid nor overcome. Whether Bloom is right or not, *Despair* is a ripe work for examining this relationship not only because it has been overlooked, but because it is an important hinge work for understanding the shape that Nabokov's career would take.⁴

If one were to say with Bloom that Proust represents the precursor whom Nabokov could neither avoid nor topple, then one might argue that Nabokov consciously portrays this failure through Hermann's own repressed relationship with Proust.⁵

Hermann's prose frequently alludes to Proust without the self-

consciousness that characterizes his Dostoevski references (perhaps this is why they have been overlooked). According to this line of reasoning, Nabokov could only invent a debased Proustian narrator as a kind of compensatory strategy for acknowledging Proust's superior artistry. Rather than unnecessarily demeaning Nabokov's achievement, I would argue that what Nabokov does in *Despair* is use Proust's example to dramatize his own mastery of the Dostoevskian aesthetic and moral dilemmas that were at the heart of Nabokov's art as well. What Hermann writes is not a failed *Crime and Punishment* or *Memoirs from a Mousehole* (Nabokov's derisive title for *Notes from Underground*). Rather, Nabokov creates Hermann's narrative as a comically inept *In Search of Lost Time* told from the perspective of a derivative Dostoevskian hero.

Repeatedly Hermann's narrative will hover over some sensation of memory that seems to contain a lost truth about to be recaptured only to dissolve again into Hermann's always tortured present. "Try as I may," he confesses in the opening paragraph of the second chapter, "I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self . . . bits of my past litter the floor" (19). Whether referring to his distant childhood or some incident freshly experienced, Hermann speaks of his memory as "something that clogs me, something hot and abhorrent and quite unbearable, which I cannot get rid of because it is as sticky as a sheet of flypaper" (88). He characterizes his narrative as a "current of memory" and seeks the object that will "set going the engine of memory," that will piece together the bits of his past (137, 67). As his narrative chafes against the remembered episodes he can neither summon nor shape, he cannot get past his early assertion that it is "dull work recounting all this. Bore me to death" (5). Hermann reveals his relation to his story and to Proust when he declares that "every man with a keen eye is familiar with those anonymously retold passages from his past life: false-innocent combinations of details, which smack revoltingly of plagiarism" (70). Whereas the memory of Proust's narrator, Marcel, becomes the means for fusing self and narrative into a perfect equilibrium, Hermann's memory instead trig-

gers the decomposition of his narrative and self. In the end, Hermann is less Nabokov's parody of Proust than the means by which he creatively transforms Proustian methods for his own narrative ends.

Chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, Hermann brilliantly displays a variety of narrative techniques and voices that reveal his creator's mastery of literary parody at the same time that they also reveal Hermann's incapacity to structure the sense of time needed to control his story.⁶ What Proust gave Nabokov was the fundamental modernist narrative that makes an artist's coming to consciousness coincide with the narrative the reader reads. The search for lost time that *Despair* enacts is what may be called a coming to unconsciousness narrative. Through Hermann Nabokov plays with Proust by having Hermann pretend that he will write a Proustian masterpiece. Nabokov can therefore express his admiration of Proust without compromising his own claims to authorial mastery. To write a narrative that to be successful must contain within it a narrative that the reader understands to be severely flawed, even bad, is a very difficult task. Such an ambition requires great artistry and would have been unimaginable before Proust. Only through a consideration of Proust's example can we measure adequately Hermann's failure and thus gauge Nabokov's achievement. As an aesthetic achievement *Despair* would otherwise never develop beyond the first paragraph because Nabokov would have no way to separate himself from either Dostoevski or the Dostoevski-imitators that Dolinin identifies. Nabokov's narrative brilliance could not be distinguished from Hermann's inspired ineptitude: they would become co-authors of a series of inspired but empty parodies.⁷ Instead, Hermann becomes a Dostoevskian shadow set off against a Proustian structure. Hermann's attempts at a memory-driven narrative hold out the possibility that he can lose his "Dusty" shadow. As he recognizes when he speaks of the "agony" of "unburdening myself" through narrative: "I [will] never free my dusty, dusky soul by this method, but merely make things worse" (108).

On the surface only is *Despair* a Dostoevskian potboiler. A

man whom he perceives to be his double. If successful, Hermann will be reborn free of his past mistakes and in control of his life. Understanding himself to be a gifted artist, Hermann considers himself above social codes and offers his narrative—a masterpiece in the making—as proof. However, his every sentence only shows what a failure, though an entertaining one, he is. His authorial voice is a bracing mixture of arrogance and fear. He claims that “there is not a thing about [literature] that I do not know” (45), but in the narrative’s second paragraph he had already admitted that “it may look as though I do not know how to start” (3). Chapter Three begins with Hermann performing a series of rejected narrative devices. His ostentatious “mastery” of narrative technique cannot conceal his absence of mastery; the result, if not the intent, is that the novel becomes Hermann’s constant repetition of failed narrative efforts. By the end of the novel he has abandoned the attempt to shape his story and settles for the immediacy of relating whatever pops into his head. Just as his story exposes Hermann as an incompetent murderer unable to conceal from the authorities his authorship of his crime, so does his erratic, derivative prose expose him as a failed author unable to claim authorship of his story.

By transforming his Raskolnikov into a failed artist, Nabokov is able to portray how a superior artist can reconstruct Dostoevski’s mismanaged narrative into a true work of art. Nabokov points to this aim by making Hermann acutely self-conscious of his similarity to Raskolnikov. Hermann obsessively refers to Dostoevski, whom he names “Dusty,” and to *Crime and Punishment*, which he calls either *Crime and Slime* or *Crime and Pun*. Clearly alluding to Raskolnikov’s Nietzschean defense of murder as an act allowable to certain select individuals, he mockingly identifies himself as “a lawbreaker of genius” (48). After he has recounted his murder, he mentions “Dusty’s great book, *Crime and Slime*,” and defiantly says that “any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question: an artist feels no remorse, even when his work is not understood, not accepted” (177). In making Hermann so painfully aware of his similarity to his literary antecedent, Nabokov creates not only a parody of a Dostoevski hero, but (as I would

add) a Dostoevskian double reimagined within the Proust-Nabokov cosmos. In this way Dostoevski is framed as a kind of aesthetic alter ego for Hermann and Nabokov—a figure of the author that neither Hermann nor Nabokov wants to become. Of course only one of them will succeed in this aim.

On the other hand, *Despair* does make clear how directly Dostoevski challenged Nabokov's sense of himself as an artist and creator. Nabokov's remarks twenty years after writing this novel consistently betray how often his characters and Dostoevski's overlap. He could be speaking of himself when he says that "it is questionable whether one can really discuss the aspects of 'realism' or of 'human experience' when considering an author whose gallery of characters consists almost exclusively of neurotics and lunatics" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 109). Nabokov further notes that Dostoevski's heroes "do not develop as personalities. We get them all complete at the beginning of the tale, and so they remain without any considerable changes although their surroundings may alter and the most extraordinary things may happen to them" (109). Likewise, illustrious Nabokovian madmen such as *Despair's* Hermann Karlovich, *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert, and *Pale Fire's* Charles Kinbote come to the reader fully formed and completely armed in their lunacy on the first page. Their madness is as it were the premise to their tales, which then involve how the protagonists force their madness on other characters. The crucial aesthetic difference between the two Russian writers—one that Nabokov felt keenly—is that where Dostoevski focuses on the state of his characters' souls, Nabokov directs the reader to his characters' acts—and the consequences that their acts have on others.

This claim may seem surprising given that so much of Nabokov's fiction is concerned with self-consumed, usually obtuse, artist figures who are obsessed with their own bizarre and disreputable schemes. Moreover, Nabokov's characters lack the interiority of Dostoevski's characters—psychological motivation for a character's actions rather famously failed to interest him. Virtually every significant Nabokov protagonist strives to complete some kind of aesthetic project and fails miserably. In the

case of Humbert or Kinbote, one can argue that they create masterpieces in spite of themselves, but this point of view depends on being so literal-minded as to forget that "their" works are the creation of Nabokov. For instance, in the brilliant scene in *Despair* where Hermann describes his splitting self, it is easy to forget that Nabokov's narrative aims are very different than Hermann's. Discussing his marriage with his wife, Lydia, Hermann admits that such "connubial bliss" he experienced occurred whenever "that imp Split had taken over" Hermann's lovemaking chores (27).⁸ While embracing his wife, his sense of himself is gradually displaced until he perceives himself to be in two places at once. Initially, Hermann stands in the middle of the room watching this other Hermann caress his wife. Gradually, his sense of disassociation intensifies so that the "interval" between his two selves became greater (28). Hermann relates that "I eventually found myself sitting in the parlor—while making love in the bedroom" (28). Hermann finds the experience of being two places at once to be addictive and his obsession with "Split" gives way to his obsession with his double, Hermann.

To most readers, it is clear that the self-division that Hermann courts here with himself is projected on to Felix who represents a chance for Hermann to prolong his game endlessly, or, as it turns out, to end the game of "Split" by murdering his double and thereby repossessing his self once and for all. G.M. Hyde, drawing on the work of R.D. Laing, argues in this context that Hermann's "neurosis is sexual, of course, in origin, schizoid in form, and involving a desperate act of transcendence which" displaces suicide as murder (110). Hyde quotes Laing's observation that the "unembodied self of the schizoid cannot really be married to anyone" (112). Given Hermann's apparent hatred of Lydia, one might also plausibly argue that Hermann's manifest psychological problems have to do with his relationship with women. His ambivalence regarding his mother reflected in his "light-hearted, inspired lying" about her could be seen as being replicated in his bizarre relationship with his wife (*Despair* 4). Yet, at the same time, it is precisely this sort of argument that Nabokov objects to because it reduces the multiple interpretative possi-

bilities he so meticulously creates into a single cause. A work of art becomes instead a case study.⁹ From a psychological standpoint, it is plausible that Hermann is trying to reintegrate himself by becoming Felix. However, because *Despair* is presented not only as the story of one man's set of attitudes and acts but as the story of how that man writes a narrative about his actions, questions concerning Hermann's "disintegration" must ultimately be narrative ones. One might observe here that Nabokov anticipates responses such as Hyde's insofar as he encourages readers to be like Hermann. If Hermann fails aesthetically to integrate his past and his present, so do such psychoanalytically motivated readings mirror Hermann's failed aesthetic impulse. As usual, Nabokov refuses to give an explanation for Hermann's behavior not located in a frustrated aesthetic desire. This is why his murder of Felix, or even the fact of his disintegrated self, cannot be separated from the literary narratives he cannot control.

What distinguishes Nabokov's practice as an author from both Hermann and Dostoevski (as Nabokov perceives him) is that he never invents a helpless character to function as the prop for the main character's self-transformation. To Nabokov, Hermann's Felix, Raskolnikov's murder victims, and the prostitute in *Notes from Underground* are less characters than narrative fodder for the characters' (and by implication the reader's) ultimate redemption. By contrast, in Nabokov's "own works," *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, the narrator's ostensible subjects, Lolita and John Shade, are drawn with a complexity that allows them to stand separate from their narrator's image of them. Through Nabokov's art, they withstand their ostensible biographer's characterization of them and thus provide the reader a perspective for resisting Humbert or Kinbote's deceptive charm. Cruelty in Nabokov is not prelude for a redemptive act, though it may be distorted or even shielded by the beautiful narrative edifice that encases it.¹⁰ Though I do not have the space to argue it fully here, Nabokov follows Proust's example in this respect. Also striving to be an artist, Proust's narrator, Marcel, treasures those characters whose aesthetic sense is highly developed. Initially, characters such as Swann, the Baron de Charlus, and the Duchess of Guermantes are presented as people of ex-

traordinary charm and wit. In the end, however, Swann's initial aesthetic appreciation of Odette becomes an ugly obsession to cage her. Likewise, the Baron's adventures with Jupien and Morel, or the Guermantes' refusal to console Swann when he knows he is dying, suggest that their "beauty" is tainted. More to the point, perhaps, is that Marcel's obsession with becoming an artist cannot be separated from his obsession to control Gilberte or Albertine, whom he keeps as a prisoner before she escapes. Although Marcel relinquishes his desire to control these characters as lovers, as people, he ultimately will control his own representations of them through his narrative. By contrast Nabokov's narrators Humbert, Kinbote, and Hermann cannot distinguish their efforts to control other characters through their art from their desire to control them as "real" people. Their confusion of art and life is what makes them monsters.

If anything, Nabokov is trickier than Proust in narrowing the distance between his characters' aesthetic desires and their cruel intentions. Marcel draws Swann and Charlus as comically sad characters; it is easy to see how destructive their obsession is for love of others. Recognizing that Swann is a precursor to Marcel's own amorous adventures, the reader (and I would argue the narrator) is not invited to be a collaborator when Marcel imprisons Albertine in the way that Hermann wants us to admire his murder of Felix or Humbert his love of Lolita. Richard Rorty suggests that the autonomy that Proust's narrator achieves is the consequence of learning "to redescribe the people who had described him." For Rorty, Marcel's narrative authority is not so much the result of his superior ability to describe something or someone but his willingness to *redescribe* someone or something: Marcel never allows a single perspective to stand for the whole. His "authority," Rorty concludes, is the result of his ability "to relinquish the very idea of authority" (103). Hermann, however, is distinctly unlike Marcel in this respect because what he seeks most of all is that his narrative become the mastery of self—his and others. He would fix truth as final and himself as the last word on what constitutes truth. The logical consequence of Hermann's fanatical adherence to himself as the ultimate arbiter of truth is his disre-

spect for the lives of others. Like Proust, then, Nabokov does not separate a given character's aesthetic fantasies from the cruelties those fantasies entail.

Dostoevski's characters veer wildly between acts of terrible cruelty and almost unimaginable kindness—in fact, more acts of kindness are likely committed by Dostoevski's characters than by Nabokov's characters.¹¹ Yet, by Nabokov's reading of Dostoevski, Raskolnikov's acts of kindness are intended by Dostoevski to efface the significance of his murders. That is, the murder of the pawnbroker and her sister is a narrative necessity: Raskolnikov must commit some heinous act so that his potential redemption will be more powerful. At one point in his lectures Nabokov characterizes the progress of Raskolnikov's soul as a journey from Bedlam to Bethlehem. From an aesthetic point of view, Nabokov sees no justification for Raskolnikov's implied transformation. He says that without "any true development of personality," Raskolnikov moves "from premeditated murder to the promise of an achievement of some kind of harmony with the outer world" (109). What interests Nabokov as an artist, then, is the implied claim that Raskolnikov's acts of murder become acts of self-creation: that he is the artist of his redemption and that murder is the medium of his art. In *Despair* Nabokov identifies this equation and then coolly deconstructs it by having his artist-protagonist, Hermann, seek self-mastery through the *aesthetic* of murder. His act of murder is the aesthetic end to which his narrative tends.

Proust, by contrast, is the author whom Hermann *unconsciously* copies and as such is quite likely the author whom Nabokov would most like to equal or surpass. Of the four twentieth-century writers whom Nabokov identified as being truly exceptional—Bely, Kafka, Proust, and Joyce—his aesthetic stance was closest to Proust's.¹² Through the mediating figure of Hermann, Nabokov at once reveals and conceals his proximity to Proust. Early in the narrative Hermann states that his text's "real author is not I, but my impatient memory" (37), a straightforward allusion to Proust's notion of *mémoire involontaire*, and one that Hermann returns to repeatedly. Elsewhere, he asserts that "it is not my rational part which is writing, but solely my memory, that devious memory of

mine" (160). He raises a centrally Proustian question when he asks: "Am I faithfully following the lead of my memory, or has perchance my pen mixed the steps and wantonly danced away?" (88). Hermann is not equipped to answer this question and, besides, he never mentions Proust's name.

Nabokov leaves it to the reader to make a connection that seems incongruous at best, and perverse at worst, since Hermann's narrative self-disintegration contrasts so sharply with the fully mature narrator that Marcel becomes by the end of Proust's seven-volume work. Hermann's admission that "I am disguised so perfectly, as to be invisible to my own self" defines his narrative's relation to Proust perfectly (21). Marcel might be describing Hermann, though, when he says that for most "the past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die" (*Remembrance* 48-49).¹³ To recreate the past something other than the operation of memory must happen. As he remarks in his lectures, "there must be a combination of present sensation (especially taste, smell, touch, sound) with a recollection, a remembrance, of the sensuous past" (*Lectures on Literature* 249).

The aesthetic fusion of past and present that Proust's narrator achieves Hermann seeks but fails to find. One might decide that Nabokov shies away from explicitly identifying Proust as Hermann's model due to his own reluctance to be so closely identified with Proust. This view, though, depends on failing to distinguish Nabokov's role of the controlling author from Hermann's appointed role as failed narrator. I do not judge the authorial anxiety of Proust that Nabokov projects on to Hermann to belong to Nabokov as well simply because Nabokov assumes that the reader who is attuned to the Hermann-Proust will understand it to acknowledge and pay tribute to Proust's mastery rather than express Nabokov's fear of being compared with a writer that he elsewhere acknowledged as a twentieth-century master. Certainly, had Nabokov any misgivings about Proust's role in the

novel, he could have written Proust out of the English language version in the same way that he wrote Dostoevski into it. In any case, where Nabokov's authorial identity is not fatally entangled with either Dostoevski or Proust, Hermann is a double for Raskolnikov precisely because he cannot achieve the appropriate union of narrative and memory that Proust's Marcel represents. Indeed, Hermann's identity-in-narrative is the exactly opposite that of Marcel. For instance, right before Hermann is about to meet with his "double," Felix, for the first time since their initial encounter, Hermann suffers an emblematic anti-Proustian moment. While he looks out from the window of his hotel "there started that fresh process of fusion, of building, that making up of a definite remembrance" that causes a chain of associations from his past to reappear to him (67). "Very possibly," he relates in a passage partially quoted before,

I should have found finally found the trifle, which, unconsciously noticed by me, had at once set going the engine of memory (or, again, I should not have found it, the simple, nonliterary explanation being that everything in that provincial German hotel chamber, even the view, vaguely and uglily resembled something seen in Russia ages ago) had I not thought of my appointment; and that made me draw on my gloves and hurry out. (67-68)

If Proust remarks that it is chance whether we find the key to our lost past, then here Nabokov dramatizes Hermann's doomed state: Hermann throughout will wrack his brain and rattle his pen to find a lost treasure that Nabokov and the reader know he is incapable of recovering and may never have had.

Reading Hermann as another version of Proust's narrator, Marcel, is tricky, though, and will land the unwary reader in one of Nabokov's vaunted narrative traps. Hermann's allusion to a lost Russia evokes his Russian-born mother, whom he describes first as "a languid lady in lilac silks" and subsequently as "a woman of the people, simple and coarse, sordidly dressed" (4). Given that Hermann's ethnically German father apparently came from one of the Baltic States that were part of the Russian empire before 1918 and had many subjects of German heritage, one might argue that Hermann's mother represented to him some idealized

version of a Russian past that was not truly his. From this perspective, one could argue that Hermann's missing madeleine is associated with either his mother or the Russian past she represents. Thus, one might well observe of the chocolate that Hermann's firm manufactures the "trademark on the wrapper showed a lady in lilac," suggesting that Hermann thinks of his mother as an image for consumption. That Hermann, however facetiously, equates one image of his mother with his firm's identity intimates that her presence in Hermann's self-conception is significant and also trivial. Ultimately, though, Hermann's refers to his mother to point the reader down the blind alleys of psychoanalysis where one is as likely to encounter Hermann's "real" self as one is likely to understand Hermann's "true" relationship to Russia. Thus, if Marcel's courtship of his mother's kiss predicts the course of Swann's love for Odette and later Marcel's for Albertine, Hermann's invocation of his mother has no aesthetic pay-off other than to point to his inability to find the key that will allow him to shape his story as he wishes. Unable to integrate his memory of his mother and the associations it conjures into his narrative, Hermann instead uses his contradictory remarks about his mother to highlight his similarity to the protagonist of *Notes from Underground*. Just as Dostoevski's protagonist confesses well into his narrative that he is a chronic liar, so does Hermann's lying about his mother serve "as a sample of one my essential traits: my light-hearted, inspired lying" (4). Without recourse either to Dostoevski's Christian mysticism or Proust's capacity for reinventing the self through narrative, Hermann is doomed to live out the fate of Dostoevski's protagonists without their promise of redemption.

Whether or not Nabokov actually intends for us to associate Hermann's invocation of his mother with Marcel's invocation of his mother in *In Search of Lost Time* matters less than the fact that Hermann's narrative relationship with his mother is emblematic of his inability to unify his narrative with any aspect of his past. Hermann's lost moment of aesthetic fusion in the German hotel room, which may or may not be related to his relationship with his mother, is anti-Proustian because he so blatantly misses the

opportunity of structuring his narrative time. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes exactly the sort of experience he forbids Hermann: the feeling of being “plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile element that was none other than the pure medium of time. One shared it—just as excited bathers share shining seawater—with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time’s common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world” (21). In contrast to Hermann’s memoir, Nabokov’s memoir presents its narrative as a way of preserving time and traveling within it. This fluid perception of the time described here becomes embodied in the narrative that is *Speak, Memory*.¹⁴ Discussing *Speak, Memory* Robert Alter notes that in contrast to Proust’s notion of involuntary memory Nabokov “conceives his relation to the past much more exclusively in volitional terms” and that “it is only a little overstated to say that for Nabokov the manipulation of language makes the past come back” (620). Alter’s remarks highlight how in *Despair* it is precisely Hermann’s failure to control either the past or present through language that dooms him to madness. Nabokov, unlike Hermann, is able “to witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past” (170).

From this perspective, the salient fact about Hermann’s relationship with his wife, Lydia, is his inability to create in his narratives a sense of time that will absorb both of them into its flow. Early in the novel Hermann recalls how for his amusement he would invent stories about his past, telling her “such a heap of lies about myself, my past, my adventures, that it would have been beyond my powers to hold it all in my head” (26). Lydia, though, either fails to notice or is unmoved by Hermann’s self-narrations. Thus, when Hermann discovers what he thinks might be his most interesting invention in the form of Felix, he declines to tell her about it (31). The desire to create is an abiding one for Hermann; indeed, his own aesthetic frustration fuels his resentment of what Lydia does like to read. He disdains her as “a great gobbler of books, [who] reads only trash, memorizing nothing

and leaving out the longer descriptions" (23). Her seeming refusal to luxuriate in narrative for its own sake, or to recognize narrative descriptions to be reflections of the consciousness of the narrator, makes her what we might think of as an anti-Proustian reader. Moreover, that she delights in cheap detective novels indicates that she would be for Nabokov a likely reader of Dostoevski—"let us always remember that basically Dostoevski is a writer of mystery stories" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 109). Perhaps Hermann is acting out his own hatred of Dostoevski when he sabotages the novels she reads by tearing out and hiding the key passages. If he cannot satisfy her as a teller of stories, then no one will. One may wonder, given Hermann's contempt for Lydia, why he professes to love her. The reason he gives is telling: "But probably the truth was that I loved her because she loved me. To her I was the ideal man: Brains, pluck" (25). In other words, Hermann loves Lydia because he sees her as a mirror to the man he wants to see as himself. When Lydia cannot adequately fulfill the role he scripts for her, he is forced to invent a new audience for his aesthetic efforts. That audience of course is his double, Felix, a debased version of Hermann himself.

Failing to persuade Felix of their resemblance and unable to manipulate Felix as he wishes, Hermann's last hope is to convince the unknown audience who would read him:

How I long to convince you! And I will, I will convince you! I will force you all, you rogues, to believe . . . though I am afraid that words alone, owing to their special nature, are unable to convey visually a likeness of that kind. (16)

A special Nabokovian irony is that from Hermann's authorial perspective he is the only reader his *Despair* will ever have. Having no audience to convince, he becomes his own audience. Although he asserts that "an author's fondest dream is to turn the reader into a spectator," it is as a reader that he destroys his dream of authorial mastery (16). Thus, it is as a reader that "memory," what he calls "that singular associate of mine," forces him to see that he has left behind a clue that will identify him as Felix's killer (203). At that moment Hermann switches from author to specta-

tor. Hermann's elaborate fantasy ends only when Hermann-the-reader murders Hermann-the-author.

To the psychoanalytically inclined reader, Hermann's discovery and eventual destruction of his double—be it himself or Felix—could be seen not only as the act of a fragmented self, but as a desperate attempt to mend that fragmented self. When he first stumbles upon the sleeping Felix, Hermann describes what he sees as if it were a perfectly realized work of art: “While I looked, everything within me seemed to lose hold and come hurtling down from a height of ten stories. I was gazing at a marvel. Its perfection, its lack of cause and object, filled me with a strange awe” (7-8). As tempting as it is to say that Hermann is looking to mend a fragmented identity, the more compelling point is that Hermann-the-artist is suddenly moved to encounter something that seems to him to exist independent of being created. Hermann less seeks his other perfect self than covets the power to have made such a perfect object. The fact that Hermann sees the sleeping body as a perfect replication of himself only inflames his desire to lay claim to having made it. The emotional and mental distress that Hermann suffers occurs because he experiences the distinction between subject and object to be melting away. Upon encountering a perfect representation of the self-division he perpetually experiences, he paradoxically apprehends this other Hermann as the fully integrated self which he would create as his own work of art.

One reason Hermann wakes Felix and destroys this perfect tableau is so that he can remake it and thereby claim it as his own creation. Inseparable from his desire to make this perfect creation his own, though, is the sense of inferiority he feels at being unable to do so. He immediately projects on to Felix the feeling of mastery that eludes him: “I stood toward him—according to his subconscious calculation—in a subtle state of dependence, as if I were the mimic and he the model” (12). Conceiving of Felix as the perfect representation of himself, Hermann approaches him as a supplicant. The sense of utter impotence that Hermann feels before his double comes to fruition in the vision Hermann endures when he sees that Felix has “pocketed my sil-

ver pencil." Suddenly, "a procession of silver pencils marched down an endless tunnel of corruption. As I followed the edge of the road I now and then closed my eyes till I all but tumbled into the ditch" (14). Hermann here envisions Felix's death in the guise of imagining his own. Hermann is the one who will lead Felix down a strange road and shoot him in the back in cold blood. His terror at seeing Felix lift his pencil—the instrument of his writing—reflects his fear of losing power over his story. As he himself suspects, Hermann is not an original author but a dismal reproduction. Not only does he lift his murder plot from one of Lydia's best-sellers (141), he cannot escape becoming a shadow of the Dostoevski characters he elsewhere scorns—a point that Ardalion makes when he refers to Hermann's murder plot as "dark Dostoevskian stuff" (205). In the end, Hermann is merely the victim of his own madness and the author of an innocent man's death.

Although Hermann addresses readers who cannot see him alongside Felix and therefore must take Hermann at his word, he knows that he lacks the skill to manipulate language as he wishes. At times it seems that every sentence he writes betrays anxiety about his prose powers. The novel begins on this note: "If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness. . . . So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale" (3). Hermann breaks the sentence off because he doubts his power to persuade his reader to suspend their likely disbelief over the tale he tells—even for a sentence. He asserts this sentence as a negative, as something he cannot, does not have the power to say. The first paragraph, consisting of a series of statements he might have said that culminates with a phrase lifted from Felix, establishes Hermann as a derivative writer incapable of controlling the presentation of time. Instead of either leading the reader up to the surprising climax of his story, or, more like Proust, infusing the present of his writing with his sense of the past remembered, Hermann almost helplessly shows the reader the flimsy structure of his narrative. "If every now and again my face pops out, as from behind a hedge, perhaps to the prim reader's annoyance, it is re-

ally for the latter's good: let him get used to my countenance" (29). By suddenly popping out from behind his narrative to reveal his authorial face, though, Hermann only succeeds in revealing how comically inconsequential—in both senses of the word—he is as an author.

Hermann's many narrative asides and disruptions project a bizarre sensation of authorial presence that contrasts sharply with the kind of memory-driven narrative that Proust ultimately achieves. It is true, as Gérard Genette suggests, that the "narrative temporality" of Proust's novel attains "a perfectly unprecedented rhythm" due to Marcel's startling and often unreconciled leaps back and forth in time (*Narrative* 112). The result, Genette suggests, is "the *increasing discontinuity* of the narrative" (93; emphasis in original). The crucial difference between Hermann and Marcel's narratives, though, is that Marcel learns how to use time rather than tries to conquer it. By the end of Proust's monumental novel the reader does not feel, for instance, that what Genette calls "ellipsis," or those moments when the narrative will "leap forward without any return," compromises the authority of Marcel's authorial stance (43). On a micronarrative level, Marcel's narrative is often discontinuous, but the entire novel absorbs these moments of discontinuity into the shape of its design. Indeed, they testify to his ability to allow "time" to structure his narrative. With *Despair*, however, the increasing discontinuity of Hermann's narrative overwhelms him and predicts his end as a madman. Time becomes Hermann's enemy as he is conquered by it at the end of the book when the police will capture him and lock him up for good.

Marcel's narrative success is a reflection of his ability not simply to perceive but also to dramatize how the past lives through the present—a perception that Faulkner once described in terms of the past never being past. Nabokov, however, structures Hermann's narrative so that this insight is forbidden to him. Instead, the reader literally looks over Hermann's shoulder as he writes; what we witness is how Hermann becomes trapped in an eternal narrative present—a version of hell—that he cannot master. For instance, Hermann writes:

A lonely spot, quite so! The pines soughed gently, snow lay about, with bald patches of soil showing black. What nonsense! How could there be snow in June? Ought to be crossed out, were it not wicked to erase; for the real author is not I but my impatient memory. (37)

Here Hermann is superimposing a description of the actual murder scene, in winter, onto his description of an earlier visit to the site in summer. Hermann's "memory" unconsciously invokes Proust but only to suggest that he writes as a murderer rather than as an artist since he cannot summon the creative will to control the scene as he desires. Presumably, were he following the prompting of his memory in a Proustian sense his writing would not be nonsense but the elucidation of some heretofore lost personal truth. According to the Proustian model, Hermann's narrative should lead inexorably to the moment where each of his past actions, along with the people he remembers, seems to settle in the precise sense of time his narrative creates. Nabokov somewhat coyly allows Hermann to understand his narrative to be building to the moment when his many near cross-outs will be erased as Hermann's story finally catches up to the promises he keeps making about it. According to the narrative plan Nabokov attributes to Hermann, this moment would coincide with his account of his successful murder and he would experience that "certain extraordinary, madly happy, all-solving moment which it was imperative I should attain; the moment of an artist's triumph; of pride, deliverance, bliss" (183).

Presumably, Hermann would experience something akin to what Marcel experiences in *The Past Recaptured* when he steps on a certain flagstone outside the Prince de Guermantes's residence and is flooded with feelings of happiness that he had experienced at different moments in his life. As Nabokov notes, at this moment Marcel understands that "something more than memory, no matter how vivid and continuous, is involved" (*Lectures on Literature* 247). Here Nabokov underscores what for him is the crucial point: Marcel's difficulty "is how to keep these impressions from vanishing under the pressure of the present" and the answer is his "new recognition of the continuity of present with past" (247). As a writer, Marcel constructs his narrative so that it

will convey the truth of his madeleine and all that it contains. Sentence-by-sentence the three thousand page novel dramatizes the insight that Marcel could only dimly apprehend when he first bit into the madeleine. As writer turned reader, Hermann reviews his narrative only to discover the mistake in his murder plan. Crucially, Hermann's confidence in his narrative is shattered when he becomes the reader rather than the artist of his work. Where Proust would continually rework and rewrite a scene from varying perspectives until he became the master of what he described, Hermann-the-reader surrenders in this moment his authorial power to reshape his own story. Experiencing no transfigured memory that understands that "the key to the problem of reestablishing the past" is "the key of art," as Nabokov writes of Proust, Hermann instead acknowledges only the flaw in his plan that ruins his work of art and must lead to his capture (208).

The truth for Hermann is crushingly mundane. He forgot to take from the scene of the crime Felix's walking stick, which bears the dead's man name. Hermann is unaware of the flaw until his memory, refreshed by his reading, recalls it. Hermann sees that his "masterpiece" reproduces his murder's flaw and to Hermann's warped mind becomes irreparably damaged. A debased Proust, Hermann sits in bed—the place where Proust also notoriously wrote—and stares "pop-eyed, at the page, at the line written by me—sorry, not by me—but by that singular associate of mine: memory" (203). In other words, Hermann surrenders his pretensions to artistry and becomes in effect an automaton. Appropriately, at this point Hermann's narrative collapses in on itself. The disintegration of narrative continuity and personal identity that Hermann's occasional authorial interruptions signaled now characterize the work as a whole. His novel degenerates first into journal-form, "the lowest form of literature," and then jumps genres altogether as the book closes with Hermann pretending to be a film director (208). The missing stick thereby becomes Hermann's anti-madeleine. Hermann's "associate," his memory, destroys the work and its author. He aptly chooses this moment to give his narrative its title: "Despair." The title perfectly conveys his failure to achieve the Proustian union of time, narrative, and self that Nabokov implies is the true narrative artist's ultimate aim.

On another level, the mistake of the missed stick allows Hermann to avoid confronting the fact that he has taken Raskolnikov's place without achieving Raskolnikov's implied redemption. He tells the readers whom he is so desperate to convince:

Listen, listen! Even if his corpse *had* passed for mine, all the same they would have found that stick and then caught me, thinking they were pinching him—there is the greatest disgrace! For my whole construction had been based upon just the impossibility of a blunder, and now it appeared a blunder there had been—and of the very grossest, drollest, tritest nature. (203)

In a sense, the walking stick suggests that the dead man's name replaces Hermann's as the author of what was to be Hermann's work of art. One recalls the pen Felix borrowed from Hermann earlier and suspects that Felix's name has now been written on the scene of the crime that is Hermann's story. If Hermann has equated a successful murder with narrative artistry as a way of avoiding the unpleasant moral implications of his crime, then Nabokov obligates the reader to confront the fact that to murder as an artist means not to be an artist at all. In the first paragraph, which consists of sentences he might have written, Hermann says that "I should have compared the breaker of the law which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer" (3). This view is the *reductio ad absurdum* to Raskolnikov's claim that the truly gifted man need not concern himself with the moral consequences of his acts. As we have seen, Hermann displays nothing but contempt for "that mystical trimming dear to that famous writer of Russian thrillers" (88), but when his narrative reaches its disappointing (to him) climax he can only unconsciously repeat the "Dusty" nonsense he pretends to loathe. By presenting Hermann's failure as one of artistry and humanity, Nabokov addresses what he takes to be the flawed artistry of Dostoevski. Rather than concealing his protagonist's horrible violation and destruction of another's identity as the necessary stage to his ultimate rebirth, Nabokov portrays his Raskolnikov as unredeemable.

Ultimately, Hermann's *Despair* cannot abolish the Dostoevskian shadow that covers it, which is to say that Nabokov's novel with a failed Proustian narrator, in the end returns to the ground of its inspiration. In the next-to-last paragraph before succumbing to unrelieved madness, Hermann holds fast to a Raskolnikov-like argument. Supposing that he were kill an ape without recrimination, he argues, might he not be able to move incrementally up the evolutionary ladder until he can murder Shakespeare without punishment. Hermann's logic continues to assume that certain human beings are intrinsically worthier than others. Where Hermann received "the lowest mark" when as a student he once tried to rewrite *Othello*, here he imagines the unwriting of Shakespeare altogether (46). He chooses Shakespeare as an example because even in his madness he continues to harbor dreams of becoming a great writer and can only imagine doing so by usurping the identity of the most daunting literary creator of all. To unmake Shakespeare would be, for Hermann, a way to avoid ever having had to confront his own spectacular failure as an author.

In the next paragraph Hermann's pseudo-logic gives way to the utter helplessness of twisting every possible word out of the letters that comprise the word stick: "What words can be twisted out of 'stick'? Sick, tick, kit, it, is, ski, skit, sit" (210). The missed stick, which is also a pun on "mystic," or the word that he most associates with Raskolnikov, shows how Hermann cannot separate himself from the "murderer and mystic" he knows Raskolnikov to be (141). His reverie is broken by the sound of dogs barking, an allusion to a nightmare he suffers while sharing a hotel room with Felix. In that dream he was haunted by "a small mock dog" made out of "grease or jelly, or else perhaps, the fat of a white worm" (96). This disgusting piece of mimicry pursues him until Hermann seems to wake up and see "on the sheet of the bed next to mine there lay curled up, like a swooned white larva, that very same dreadful little pseudo dog . . ." until he finally wakes up for good (96-97). Along with showing that Hermann sits uneasily between "reality" and "dreams," a point reinforced by his anxiety about sharing a room with his double, the night-

mare represents Hermann's unconquerable fear of both repeating something endlessly and of being endlessly repeated. The dogs he hears barking, a recurrence of his dream, indicate that he cannot escape this horror he fears. Before disappearing into the endless nightmare of his madness, Hermann suffers one moment of clarity when he asks: "What have I done?" (210). He speaks to himself rather than the reader but the reader's judgment is precisely what the "author" of *Despair* most fears: he has been endlessly doubled—not as Marcel or even Felix, but as another Raskolnikov though without Raskolnikov's redemption.

By suspending Hermann in an eternal hall of mirrors, a hell of infinite doubling, Nabokov succeeds where Dostoevski did not: he makes murder both truly awful and non-redemptive. In Nabokov's universe, Raskolnikov is a cruel character whose cruelty is cloaked by his madness. What Nabokov questions is not the madness of Dostoevski's characters, but the consequences of their madness. As I noted earlier, a central truth about Nabokov is that he never separates his characters' aesthetic dreams from their often cruel consequences on other characters. I cannot think of a case where Nabokov explores a protagonist's aesthetic fantasies without also revealing, however incidentally, the cruel consequences those fantasies often have on others. Arguably, Nabokov's depiction of murder in *Despair* is more terrifying precisely because we can see how senseless is Hermann's logic for killing. When Hermann dresses Felix prior to murdering him, there is a terror to the scene that derives from the fact that Hermann has tried to implicate his reader in his plan. We must withdraw from the strange pleasure of Hermann's company if we are to recoil at the horror of Hermann's apparent calm. In this moment Nabokov makes the reader see what Hermann cannot: the awful brutality of taking another person's life. Arguably, Hermann's *Despair* is finally one long confession that knows that no forgiveness from its reader will be forthcoming—if for no other reason than that Hermann is his narrative's only reader and even he is unconvinced. Nabokov's dazzling wordplay and ingenious plots can sometimes make it difficult to see the characters who are represented as victims of the narrator's ingenuity. Nabokov's fa-

mous assertion that what matters to him is "aesthetic bliss" tempts the reader to separate his characters' aesthetic endeavors from the results of their actions (*Lolita* 314).

Some may say who cares if *Despair*'s Hermann is a murderer (or *Lolita*'s Humbert a pedophile) when Nabokov writes so beautifully? Art is for art's sake. In Nabokov's universe a successful artist is one who deceives for the pleasure of others (readers), while the failed artist is one who deceives only for his own pleasure and delusion. Readers sometimes forget that included in his definition of "aesthetic bliss" are the words "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" ("On" 315). Of those words, I would highlight "curiosity" because it suggests Nabokov's commitment to never missing or forgetting to portray a significant detail. There are many examples of how and where Hermann fails as an artist but by Nabokov's understanding of "bliss" perhaps Hermann's most glaring flaw is his extremely limited sense of curiosity. A better artist would not have misplaced that stick, not to mention the many other small mistakes of perception Hermann made. Without a fully developed sense of curiosity, the other qualities Nabokov identifies likely cannot be attained either. If readers accept the protagonist's self-deception as their own—if they fail to have sufficient curiosity about what a Nabokov narrator is actually up to—then they have failed to rise to the pitch of perception that Nabokov's artistry has struck.

A representative instance of how Nabokov might ensnare the uncurious reader in his protagonist's sinister designs occurs when Hermann mails the letter to Felix that finalizes their rendezvous with murder. Instead of placing the letter in the mailbox himself, he asks a young girl, "a delicate little thing," to place it in the box for him (124). Why does he do this? Rather than committing the predictable gesture of a paranoiac who does not want to be seen by anyone dropping off the correspondence that he knows will lead to another's death, Hermann does it because he wants to implicate an innocent as part of his crime. "Oh, by the bye," he cheerfully notes, "that child, she will be very good-looking and probably happy, and she will never know in what an eerie business she had served as a go-between" (125). What he cannot do to

the reader he does to this unknowing girl. A chilling foreshadowing of Humbert Humbert, Hermann offers the image of the child's innocence spoiled as a perverse gift to the reader and his most persuasive narrative gesture. Hermann's act haunts the reader because we must know what the child cannot. This scene takes on added significance when Nabokov makes it clear in his 1965 translation of *Despair* that he considered Hermann to be an analogue with *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert. Speaking of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, Rorty says that Nabokov writes "reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human being into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering" (157). As Rorty notes, although Nabokov's best narrator-protagonists "*write as well as their creator at his best*," they are "people whom Nabokov himself loathes" (158; emphasis in original). Their shared sin, Rorty says, is "incuriosity," or precisely the opposite of what Nabokov defines as "aesthetic bliss."¹⁵

In his lecture on Dostoevski Nabokov submits "that the true artist is the person who never takes anything for granted" (*Lectures on Russian literature* 113). For Nabokov, attention to detail is an essential quality of any truly successful artist. Nearly all readers are struck by Hermann's inability to register the difference between himself and Felix. By having Hermann acknowledge that only the eyes do not match up, Nabokov suggests that Hermann's vision as an artist is severely flawed. Ardalion, the rival artist figure in *Despair*, makes the same point when he tells Hermann that the true artist registers the differences between things not their similarities (41). Although Ardalion is not depicted as a terribly gifted artist, his remark complements Nabokov's observation in *Speak, Memory* that the subtle practice of mimesis is endemic to nature.

When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but marking mimicking grub bored holes are generously thrown in. "Natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to

the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. (125)

Marveling at the mimetic capacity of butterflies, Nabokov also recognizes that their form of mimesis is miraculous because they only seem to become the leaves they mimic. The butterflies must be distinguished from what they mimic by virtue of their ability to copy what they perceive. Hermann, too, is astounded by the "natural" similarity he perceives between himself and Felix, but this similarity is merely the result of Hermann's unnatural selection. Hermann rather assumes a similarity that does not exist and becomes the predator rather than the self-protective artist.

Hermann hoped that by taking his genius for granted he might get away with passing off a murder as a perfectly realized work of art. When Hermann kills Felix he in effect attempts to return Felix to the state in which he first encountered him, only this time to do it as Felix's maker (or unmaker). From their first encounter Hermann has seen Felix as mere matter to be acted upon and controlled. Making Felix into his puppet, Hermann tells Felix where to go, dresses him up, and finally he kills him. Hermann would use Felix to become a kind of god but he as much admits his aesthetic failure when he tries to recapture his god-like status by writing this narrative. A more telling statement, however, is the one he makes when he notes that the waking Felix did not resemble him so much as the sleeping Felix: "Life only marred my double" (15). Hermann is of course right to point out that art is always a representation—a point Nabokov made often. Hermann's fatal mistake is that he tries to make his art "real" by murdering Felix. To Nabokov, Hermann's true crime is not that he cannot escape the shadow of his narrative double, Raskolnikov, but that his work undermines the hope that art might be a perfect realm to which imperfect humans can aspire. Were Hermann, like Nabokov, telling the story of the story of his attempt to make murder art, then Hermann might have succeeded in his ambition. Recognizing the other cardinal Nabokovian point that art is deception, Hermann succeeds only in deceiving himself. Thus, his *Despair* becomes a work of art under the name of Vladimir

Nabokov, who may or may not be the emigre Russian novelist Hermann persistently imagines to be reading his work.¹⁶

Commenting on *Despair*, Vladislav Khodasevich said that Hermann suffered "not the despair of a murderer scheming for money, but the despair of an artist incapable of believing in the object of his art" (Field 168). Khodasevich's remark that "the theme of Sirin's art is art itself" is of course the starting point for any discussion of Nabokov, but it is surely important that with the possible exception of *Ada* the only Nabokov work that represents a successful artist is his work about himself, *Speak, Memory*. Certainly, none of Nabokov's novels achieve the kind of fusion that *In Search of Lost Time* does.¹⁷ *Despair*, most pointedly, is a failed Proustian novel, one that Nabokov arranges so that the failure is not technically his. Nabokov borrows Proust's narrative pattern and lends it to Hermann to mishandle, but neither author of *Despair* keeps it as his own. Although Nabokov's later experiments with memory and time were often extraordinary, they do not surpass Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Instead, Nabokov converts his reverence for Proust into a novel that might articulate most forcefully his distance from Dostoevski. In *Despair* Nabokov adapts his Proust's narrative model to imprison Hermann and his Dostoevskian fantasies within Nabokov's own aesthetic universe and thereby separates Hermann's derivative Dostoevskian novel from Nabokov's peculiarly original one. Although Nabokov implies that Proust is his ideal artist, the truth is that Nabokov, as always, points to himself. After Hermann disappears from the novel along with "Dusty," "Turgy," and all the rest, only one world remains, named *Despair*, and it belongs to Vladimir Nabokov and, perhaps, the reader.

Notes

- 1 When Jean Genet, for instance, first read Dostoevski, it is said that he could read no more than three pages or so a day because he found Dostoevski to be so intensely suggestive.

2 Translators' spellings of "Dostoevski" vary. Throughout, I have employed Nabokov's spelling.

3 Dolinin's essay is a crucial one for understanding how Nabokov responded not just to the great nineteenth-century Russian writers, but to Russian writers contemporaneous with him. The number of writers Nabokov finds "guilty of imitativeness and banality" are too numerous to mention but chief among them according to Dolinin are Valerii Briusov, Leonid Andreev, and, especially, Ilia Erenberg, a popular novelist of the day. Dolinin shows how Nabokov's English language version of *Despair* "either eliminated" or made "almost unrecognizable in translation" the "veiled parodic allusions to contemporary Russian literature that are so prominent in the original" (44). The result, Dolinin suggests, is "the reorientation from the progeny to the progenitor, from the modernist 'dostoevshchina' to Dostoevsky proper" (44). From my perspective, Dolinin's argument reveals the elder Nabokov to be intensely interested in marking his place among the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers to whom he felt closest.

4 Foster argues that *Despair* marks "a turning point" that indicates his increasing distance from the Dostoevski-inspired French literature represented by Malraux, Camus, and Sartre. Foster's reading of *Despair* also suggests that Nabokov attacks Dostoevski in favor of Proust but does not analyze in detail how Nabokov figures Hermann as a kind of failed Proust. See *Nabokov's Art* 104-06. See also his very helpful essay, "Nabokov and Proust," as well as his discussion of how Nabokov portrays memory in his early fiction before reading Proust ("Nabokov Before Proust"). Bloom says that "Nabokov compares weakly to Proust, his most daunting precursor" (2). Although Bloom is speaking specifically of *Lolita*, his remarks are meant to encompass Nabokov's work as a whole. If we understand Nabokov's relationship to Proust to be agonistic, then I think that we have to agree with Bloom that Nabokov was unable to slay his precursor, Proust. It may well be that a Bloomian reading reveals how Nabokov was closer to Proust to Dostoevski. Certainly, my argument could be reversed to say that Dostoevski becomes the screen to mask Nabokov's helpless indebtedness to Proust. See Bloom's "Introduction" to *Vladimir Nabokov* (1987). For other discussions of Nabokov's later works and their relationship to Proust, see Robert Alter, Brian Boyd, Christian

Moraru, and J. E. Rivers.

5 If Nabokov's relationship to Proust must be understood as "agonistic" in the Bloomian sense, then I agree with Bloom that there is no way we can say that Nabokov was able to slay Proust. In which case, one could argue that in *Despair* Dostoevski becomes the screen to mask Nabokov's helpless indebtedness to Proust. For Bloom of course the father-precursor must either be slain or surrendered to. Rather than bloodying Nabokov with Proust, though, I would prefer to say that while Nabokov's literary sympathies clearly belonged to Proust, the Russian-European-American writer succeeded in creating a literary universe uniquely his own.

6 Dostoevski is not Nabokov's only target. Hermann at some point refers to virtually every major nineteenth-century Russian author. Hermann's name, however, comes from the work of an author whom he revered: Pushkin and his story, "The Queen of Spades."

7 In an essay that perceptively identifies and traces the many writers that Nabokov parodies in *Despair*, William C. Carroll argues that "Nabokov has condemned Hermann to live in a symbolic world where literary allusions form a constricting and menacing web," one from which he ultimately cannot escape. I agree with Carroll but think that Proust's example is what makes this web work. Otherwise, the book would be a series of loosely connected pastiches, rather like interconnected skits (99).

8 This scene appears only in the later English version, not in the 1930s original novel.

9 Nabokov of course views Dostoevski's fiction to be inflated case studies. In his lectures Nabokov actually uses case studies to interpret Dostoevski (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 107-09).

10 For the best discussion of cruelty in Nabokov see Rorty (141-68).

11 Interestingly, Harry Levin suggests in *The Gates of Horn* that Dostoevski's influence on Proust was profound. According to Levin, Proust took from Dostoevski "that presentation of character in all its growth and change and fullness of potentialities and contradictions" (410). Thus, what Rorty identifies to be Proust's singular trait—to never let a character be fixed to a single point of view—Levin finds to be emblematic of Proust's relationship to Dostoevski. Nabokov and Levin were friends and sometime sparring partners on literary matters. Unfortunately, I could find no account of any exchange they may have had concerning Dostoevski and Proust.

12 Nabokov often pointed out that his sense of himself as an artist was already established before he read Proust (or Joyce and Kafka either, for that matter). When exactly he read Proust is a matter of debate—indeed, a riddle of perhaps mistaken memory. It is possible that he was reading Proust as early as his years at Cambridge (1919–21). One friend observes that no admirer of French literature at that time and place could have been unaware of Proust. According to Brian Boyd, Nabokov almost certainly had read Proust by 1930 (*Russian Years* 354). However, Nabokov himself told J.E. Rivers that he first read Proust during the years 1936–38, or after the initial composition of *Despair* (141). Because Nabokov revised the 1966 English version of *Despair* significantly from the original Russian version, one might be inclined to think that the association with Proust was something that he wrote in after the fact. However, Janet Greyson's analysis of the Russian and English versions of *Despair* suggests that this was not the case as the passages that Nabokov rewrote most extensively did not concern Hermann's various botched treatises on memory. Foster, however, has found significant references to Proust in several of Nabokov's works preceding these dates, especially in the Russian version of *Laughter in the Dark*. Perhaps because of the contradictory evidence relating to when Nabokov first read Proust, Foster notes that though critics have "commented suggestively on his career after 1950, [critics] have yet to provide a detailed account of Nabokov's earlier interests in Proust" (472). For a discussion of how Nabokov's early novels treat the themes of time and memory in ways that made him and Proust modernist fellow travelers, see Philip Sicker.

13 My quotations are from the 1982 Moncrieff/Kilmartin edition, however, I follow Nabokov's example in referring to Proust's novel as *In Search of Lost Time*.

14 See also Christian Moraru who argues that Nabokov, like Proust, aims for a narrative that "achieves not a mere transcription of recollections, but a 'hermeneutics' of the past" (177).

15 Rorty says that "this particular sort of genius-monster—the monster of incuriosity—is Nabokov's contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities" (161).

16 Actually, Hermann, in his delirium, seems to be conflating Nabokov with Dostoevski, who is much more likely to be identified as "the well known author of psychological novels" than is Nabokov (80).

17 *The Gift* is Nabokov's only sustained portrait of an artist who is not destroyed by madness or moral degradation. However, even there, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's ultimate achievement is a projected one.

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